English Poetry in Quebec

edited by John Glassco, McGill University Press

Montreal 1965, 136 pp, $1.95 (prbk)

This little book is the result of a poetry conference held at Foster, Quebec in the Fall of 1963. Editor John Glassco tells us he shares responsibility for the idea and the organization of the conference with Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith. He also tells us that little of the ebullient character of the conference is revealed in this book which was, apparently, an after-thought implemented too long after the event to retain much freshness.

The book's title English Poetry in Quebec was perhaps chosen in deference to the Government of Quebec which contributed $1000.00 to make the conference possible. A better title would have been The Foster Poetry Conference. This would at least have avoided embarrassing questions from readers such as "Why were writers from Kingston, Toronto and as far away as Vancouver invited to participate?" (Do they all have summer residences in the Eastern Townships?) or "Why were only there particular English poets in Quebec invited?" (Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Ralph Gustafson, in addition to those named above constituting an older establishment, plus a dozen or so lesser known and younger poets listed as "delegates."

We are not told how the delegates were selected, only that had there been more money there would have been more of them.) And a final question, "Well, what about English poetry in Quebec?" The book tells us nothing. The closest essay "The Poet in Quebec Today" is an all-too-brief discussion by by Frank Scott of French poetry in Quebec. This essay is slight as it stands. Had it been developed, particularly in relation to what is happening in Quebec today, it might well have provided a justifiablen theme for the conference and a good title for the book.

Two thirds of the book contains essays originally presented as talks. One of them, "The Creative Process" by Irving Layton, has already appeared as the preface to The Laughing Rooster. Another, "The Poet and the Nuclear Crisis" by A.J.M. Smith, explores the moral obligations of the poet in the modern world. A third, "Revolution and Poetry", (nothing to do with Quebec) is by George Whalley who, after a long thoughtful windup, makes the pitch that poetry is intrinsically revolutionary. Two essays, "The Reviewer of Poetry" by Milton Wilson and "The Little Magazine" by Louid Dudek, are disappointing. No doubt in the heat of the actual conference these topics were explored more fully but what we have here in the book appears to be merely the seminar leaders' rough notes assembled long after the event.

The last third of the book offers thirty-seven poems selected from those read by the poets to their fellow delegates. These may be considered worth the effort and expense of producing the book, even though several of the best poems are already in print elsewhere. One of the poems by John Glassco reveals the natural chasm between the oldsters and the young hopefuls at the conference.

KINES

Addressed to a dozen young Canadian Poets,
after unwisely Devouring five Little Magazines
at a Sitting

Enough, enough. Gentlemen, I protest

Over and over and over
These mementoes of your fornications
Vignettes of your sensitive childhood
Kicks from jazz,
And all these poetics about poetcis about poetics
And the fearsome insults and the fulsome accoledes
AND your girl-friend's vulva
AND your trip to Mexico

Please, gentlemen, please

Much of the credit for organizing the Foster Conference and for editing this book must go to John Glassco. He is certainly enthusiastic about the results; and it may be that such events do enhance the writers' sense of community, as he says. This reviewer remains unconvinced that such arbitrary and heterogeneous gatherings of poets as poets is in fact fruitful in terms of literature; and there is also doubt as to whether the proceedings of such a gathering call for publication in book form -- especially under such a misleading title.